



THE LEAGUE
OF WOMEN VOTERS
OF ILLINOIS

From: League of Women Voters of Illinois
Nancy Marcus, President
Darlene Bakk, Mental Health Issue Specialist
Eileen Subak, Criminal Justice Issue Specialist

Re: Testimony

The League welcomes the opportunity to make comments on nursing home safety regarding persons with mental illness. The League is nonpartisan and a multi-issued organization committed to open, responsive government, brought about through informed, involved citizens.

The League has a position based on a study on institutional and community programs for persons with serious mental illness it undertook in 1986. The major conclusion of the Mental Health Task Force was: "The mental health system in Illinois is not a system at all. It is a patchwork of state facilities and local programs varying in quality. People with serious mental illnesses have great difficulty in getting needed services because of the nature of their illness, the lack of resources and poor coordination of services."

The League also has a position on criminal justice based on a study conducted in the early 1970s. In part the findings demonstrated support for expansion of prevention and treatment programs in order to ease the burden on the criminal justice system. It also supports that it is essential that there be funding for specialized programs for offenders, such as mental health services, programs for female offenders and substance abuse treatment.

The League's 1989 publication, "A Profile of Community Services for the Mentally Ill in Illinois," found that housing is the greatest need because of the shortage of critical residential programs which were "seldom or never available" in their local communities. Families with relatives with serious mental illness expressed that affordable housing was the single most urgent need. It also found that nursing homes acted as housing substitutes with an estimated 12,000 mentally ill persons residing in nursing homes according to the Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities. According to recent numbers the number rose to currently 14,258 from 1998's numbers of 11,808.

Yet decades later, there has been little change from the State to correct and move forward on recommendations and initiatives suggested by the League and other organizations interested in the well-being of these populations. Instead, conditions may have deteriorated. Not only are there fewer state hospital beds but an increasing number of offenders with mental health needs can be found in our court systems and in our juvenile and adult correctional facilities.

The League is supporting the creation of mental health courts and is actively working with others to address the needs of youth and adults who are returning to the community.

Whether one has a diagnosis of mental illness and/or has a past criminal background and resides in a nursing home, safety can be enhanced while improving the lives of those who are placed in those environments by the following actions:

- Provide adequate funding and monitoring of nursing home programs.
- Enforce the mental health code
- Honor and respect individual rights
- Provide humane conditions
- Ensure quality mental health services and other pertinent programs targeted at those living within facilities are readily available, and where applicable are also assist and place persons in community settings with decent, accessible housing options and quality support services
- Provide better screening techniques